

TWO SORTS OF HEARERS

NO. 1467B

A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“But be you doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.
For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man
beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholds himself,
and goes his way, and straightway forgets what manner of man he was.
But whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being
not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”
James 1:22-25.*

JAMES has no speculations. “By their fruits you shall know them,” seems to have taken possession of his mind and he is always demanding practical holiness. He is not satisfied with the buds of hearing—he wants the fruits of obedience. We need more of his practical spirit in this age, for there are certain ministers who are not content with sowing the old seed, the selfsame seed which, from the hand of apostles, confessors, fathers, reformers, and martyrs produced a harvest unto God. But they spend their time in speculating as to whether the seed of tares grown under certain circumstances may not bring forth wheat—whether at any rate good wheat would not be the better for the admixture of just a little sprinkling of tare seed. We need somebody to take these various theories, put them into a cauldron, boil them down and see what is the essential practical product of them.

Some of you may have seen in the newspapers a short time ago an article which fastened itself upon my mind—an article with regard to the moral state of Germany. The writer, himself a German, says that the skepticism of the professed preachers of the Word, the continual doubts which have been suggested by scientific men and more especially by professedly religious men as to revelation, have now produced upon the German nation the most frightful consequences. The picture which he gives makes us fear that our German friends are treading upon a volcano which may explode beneath their feet.

The authority of the government has been so severely exercised that men begin to be weary of it and meanwhile the authority of God has been put so much out of the question that the basis of society is undermined. I need not, however, ground my remarks upon that article, for the French Revolution at the end of the last century remains in history as an enduring warning as to the dread effects of philosophy when it has cast suspicion upon all religion and created a nation of infidels. I pray God that the same may not happen here, but the party of “modern thought” seem resolved upon repeating the experiment. So greatly is the just severity of God ignored and so trifling an evil is sin made out to be, that if men were to be doers of what they hear, and to carry out what has been taught from certain professedly Christian pulpits, anarchy would be the result. Free-thinking always leads that way. God keep us from it.

While preachers too often toy with preaching, how much there is among hearers of the same fashion? Hearing is often merely a critical exercise and the question after a sermon is not, “How was that truth fitted to your case?” but, “How did you like *him*?” as if that had anything to do with it. When you hear music, do you ask, “How did you like the trumpet?” No, it is the music—not the instrument—that your mind thinks about. Yet many persons always consider the minister rather than his message. Many contrast one preacher with another when they should contrast themselves with the divine law. Thus, hearing the Gospel is degraded into a pastime and judged to be little better than a theatrical entertainment. Such things must not be. Preachers must preach as for eternity and look for fruit—and hearers must carry out what they hear or otherwise the sacred ordinance of preaching will cease to be the channel of blessing and will rather be an insult to God and a mockery to the souls of men. I shall not, at

any very great length, but I hope with much earnestness, speak of two classes of hearers—the first, *the unblest class* and the second, *the class who*, according to the text, *are blessed in their deed*.

I. First, THE UNBLEST CLASS.

They are hearers, but they are described as *hearers who are not doers*. They hear—some of them pretty regularly, others of them only now and then just to while away an hour—and they hear with considerable attention, because they appreciate good speaking. They are interested in doctrine, perhaps having some little knowledge of the Christian system, and they like to discuss a point or two. Moreover, they are anxious to be able to say that they heard such a one preach, of whom his fame has gone abroad. But as to doing what they hear, that has not entered their minds.

They have heard a sermon on repentance, but they have not repented. They have heard the Gospel cry, “Believe!” but they have not believed. They know that he who believes purges himself from his old sins, yet they have had no purging, but abide as they were. Now, if I address such, let me say to them—it is clear that you are and must be unblest. Hearing of a feast will not fill you. Hearing of a brook will not quench your thirst. The information that there is gold in the Bank of England will not enrich you—you need cash in your own pocket. The knowledge that there is a shelter from the storm will not save the ship from the tempest. The information that there is a cure for a disease will not make the sick man whole. No, gifts must be grasped, blessings must be appropriated and made use of, if they are to be of any value to us. O sirs, you know what you should do, but you have not done it! You have been half-inclined to attend to eternal things, but you have let them go and so you are still among those unblest hearers who hear in vain.

Next, these hearers are described as *deceiving themselves*. “Deceiving your own selves,” says James. What did they deceive themselves about? Why, probably they thought they were considerably better for being hearers—much to be commended and sure to get a blessing. They would not have been happy if they had not heard the Word on Sunday and they look with disgust upon their neighbors who make nothing of the Sabbath. They themselves are very superior people because they are regular church-goers or chapel-goers. They have a sitting, a hymnbook, and a Bible—is not that a good deal?

If they stayed away from a place of worship for a month, they would be very uneasy, but though they do not believe that going to a place of worship will save them, yet it quiets their conscience and they feel themselves more at ease. I should like to feed you for a month on your theory. I would rattle the plates in your ears and see whether you would be fed. I would not accommodate you with a bed at night. Why should I? I would preach you a discourse upon the benefit of sleep. Nor need I even give you a room to occupy—I would read you an eloquent dissertation upon domestic architecture and show you what a house should be. You would very soon quit my door and call me inhospitable, if I gave you music instead of meat, and yet you deceive yourselves with the notion that merely hearing about Jesus and His great salvation has made you better men.

Or perhaps the deceit runs in another line—you foster the idea that the stern truths which you hear do not apply to you. Sinners? Yes, certainly—the preacher addresses sinners and they may get good out of it—but *you* are not a sinner, at least not in any special sense so as to need looking after. Repentance? Most people ought to repent, but you do not see any reason why *you* should repent. Looking to Christ for salvation? “Excellent doctrine,” you say, “excellent doctrine!” But, somehow, *you* do not look to Him for salvation.

Here is the scriptural verdict upon this opinion of yours—“Deceiving your own selves.” The Gospel does not deceive you, it tells you, “You must be born again, you must believe in Jesus Christ or be lost.” The preacher does not deceive you. He never said half a word to support the notion that coming to this place would be of any service to you unless you would yield your hearts to Christ. No, he has learnt to speak plain English about such matters. You deceive your own selves if, being hearers and not doers, you derive comfort from that which you hear.

And then, again, according to our text, *these people are superficial hearers*. They are said to be like a man who sees his natural face in a glass. Now, even a casual hearer will often find the preaching of the

Gospel to be like looking in a glass and seeing himself. When a glass was first exhibited to some fresh discovered Negro tribe, the chieftain as he sees himself is perfectly astonished. He looks, and looks again, and cannot make it out.

So is it in the preaching of the Word—the man says, “Why, those are my words. That is my way of feeling.” I have often known hearers exclaim, “Why, that is the very expression I used as I was coming along.” They feel like her of old who said, “Come, see a man which told me all things that ever I did.” Such a person reads his Bible and he says, “Come, see a book which tells me all things that I ever did. Is not this God’s book?” The fact is that the Word of God is a discerners of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

As you have seen hanging up in the butcher’s shop the carcasses of animals cut right down the center, so the Word of God is “quick and powerful, piercing to the dividing of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow.” It opens up a man to himself and makes him see himself. He is quite astonished and cannot make it out. I have no doubt many of you who are unconverted here have felt this under a searching sermon.

When you have been reading the Scriptures you have been perfectly astonished at the way in which you have been revealed to yourselves—but it has been superficial work. If a man looks at himself in a glass and then puts down the mirror and goes his way, he has made but very poor use of it, for it was intended to lead him to remove spots and improve his personal appearance by washing. Looking in the glass and noticing a black mark on your forehead is mere child’s play if you do not wash the spot away.

To see yourself as God would have you see yourself in the glass of Scripture is something, but you must afterwards go to Christ for washing or your looking is very superficial work. God grant that if you are made to feel the revealing power of the Word of God you may at once come to the practical point and “wash and be clean.”

The text accuses these persons of being *hasty hearers*—“he beholds himself and goes his way.” They hear a sermon and they are off. They never give the Word time to operate—they are back to business, back to talk and idle chit-chat the moment the service ends. Inquirers’ meetings are often eminently useful because they give people a little opportunity to think over what they have heard—while much of hearing is not followed up with thought and so it is ineffectual.

We get much more out of meditation than out of hearing. Like the cattle, we must chew the cud if we would get nutriment from spiritual food, but few do this. It is a great mercy for us, considering the quantity of nonsense there is in the world, that we have two ears so that we can let idle words go in one ear and out the other. But it is a great pity that we should use those two ears in such a way in reference to the Word of God. Let it have a lodgment, dear friend. Do not let the Gospel come in one ear and out the other. How are you to prevent it? Why let it come in both ears. Let it have two roads right down to the soul and shut your ears when the truth has thoroughly entered in and compel it to abide in the chamber of your soul.

How much of blessing would come to men if they carried the Word home with them. If they took the text to pieces, weighed it, considered it, and prayed for a personal application of it. Then they would become spiritually wise by the teaching of the Holy Ghost. But alas, they are hasty hearers—they look in the glass and go their way.

One other thing is said about them, namely, that they are *very forgetful hearers*—they forget what manner of men they are. They have heard the discourse and that is the end of it. You know the story of Donald’s coming home a little sooner from church than usual and his wife inquiring, “What! Donald! Is the sermon all done?” He replied, “No, no, it is all *said*, but it has not begun to be done yet.” But while it has not begun to be done, it often happens that the sermon has ended with many hearers. They have listened to it, but it has ran through them like water through a sieve and they will recollect no more of it till the judgment day.

There is no sin in having a bad memory, but there is great sin in refusing at once to obey the Gospel. If you cannot recollect the text or even remember the subject tomorrow morning, I shall not blame you,

but the recollection of the spirit of the whole thing, the drinking in and absorption into yourself of the truth—that is the main matter and the carrying of the truth into practice is the essence of the business.

That traveling dealer did well who, while listening to Mr. William Dawson, when he was speaking about dishonesty, stood up in the midst of the congregation and broke a certain yard measure with which he had been in the habit of cheating his customers. That woman did well who said that she forgot what the preacher talked about, but she remembered to burn her bushel when she got home, for that too had been short in measure.

Never mind about remembering the sermon if you remember at once to practice it. You may forget the words in which the truth was couched, if you will, but let it purify your life. It reminds me of the gracious woman who used to earn her living by washing wool. When her minister called upon her and asked her about his sermon and she confessed that she had forgotten the text, he said, “What good could it have done you?” She took him into her back place where she was carrying on her trade. She put the wool into a sieve and then pumped on it. “There, sir,” she said, “your sermon is like that water. It runs through my mind, sir, just as the water runs through the sieve. But then the water washes the wool, sir, and so the good Word washes my soul.” David, in the one hundred and third psalm, speaks of those who remember the Lord’s commandments *to do* them—and that is the best of memory. Mind that you have it.

Thus I have described certain hearers and I fear we have many such in all congregations—admiring hearers, affectionate hearers, attached hearers—but all the while unblest hearers because they are not doers of the work. We have wondered how it was that they never confessed themselves to be followers of Christ, but we suspect that they have never made such a confession because it would not be true. And yet they are very good, very kind, helpful to a good cause, and their lives are very upright and commendable, but we grieve that they are not decided Christians. One thing they lack—they have no faith in Christ.

It does surprise me how some of you can be so favorable to everything that has to do with divine things and yet have no personal share in the good treasure. What would you say of a cook who prepared dinners for other people and yet died of starvation? Foolish cook, you say. Foolish hearer, say I. Are you going to be like Solomon’s friends, the Tyrians, who helped to build the temple and yet went on worshipping their idols? Sirs, are you going to look on at the table of mercy, and admire it, and yet refuse its provisions? Does it give you a thrill of pleasure to see so many taken from the highways and the hedges and brought in, and will you stand outside and never partake yourself?

I always pity the poor little boys on a cold winter night who stand outside a steaming cook shop window and look in and see others feasting, but have none themselves. I cannot understand you. All things are ready and you are bid and persuaded to come—and yet you are content to perish with hunger. I pray you think of yourselves and I ask the Spirit of God to make you doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

II. But, now, a few minutes for those who are BLESSED HEARERS—those who get the blessing.

Who are they? They are described in the twenty-fifth verse—“But whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”

Now, notice that this hearer who is blest is, first of all, *an earnest, eager, humble hearer*. Note the expression. He does not look *upon* the law of liberty and go his way, but he looks *into* it. It is the same word which is used in the passage, “which things the angels desire to look into,” and the Greek seems to imply a sort of stooping down to look intently into a thing.

Thus is it with the hearer who obtains the blessing—he hears of the Gospel and he says, “I will look into this. There is a something here worth attention.” He stoops and becomes a little child that he may learn. He searches as men do who are looking after diamonds or gold. “I will look into it,” he says. “My mother used to tell me that there was something charming in it and my father died triumphantly through the influence of it—I will investigate it. It shall not be for want of examination that I let it slip.”

Such an individual hears intently and earnestly, laying his soul open to the influences of the truth, desiring to feel its holy power, and to practice its divine commands. That is the right kind of hearer—an earnest listener whose senses are all aroused to receive and retain all that can be learned.

It is implied too that he is a *thoughtful, studious, searching hearer*—he looks into the perfect law. I call you back to the figure. As a man will put an insect under a glass and inspect it again and again through the microscope—looking at the wings, at each joint of the back, and at every part of the creature under his eye—so a hearer who desires a blessing looks closely into the Word. He is sacredly curious. He inquires. He pries. He asks all those who should know. He likes to get with old Christians to hear of their experience. He loves to compare spiritual things with spiritual—to dissect a text and see how it stands in relation to another—and to its own parts, for he is in earnest when he hears the Word.

Alas, dear friends, as I have said before, many hearers are too superficial. They listen to what is said and that is the end of it—they never search for the marrow of the bones. The hearer who obtains a blessing first gives his whole heart up to attention and afterwards keeps his heart saturated with the truth by an earnest, diligent, searching study of it, and so, by the Spirit's teaching, he discovers what is the mind of God to his soul.

Then this hearer goes further. Looking so steadily *he discovers that the Gospel is a law of liberty*—and indeed it is so. Blessed is the condition of those who are free from the law of Moses and have come under law to Christ, who emancipates the soul from every form of bondage. There is no joy like the joy of pardon, there is no release like release from the slavery of sin, there is no freedom like the liberty of holiness, the liberty to draw near to God. He who hears the Gospel aright soon discovers that there is that in it which will remove every fetter from his soul. He looks and looks, and at last loves that perfect law of liberty which sets his heart at large to run in the way of God's commands. Would God that all of you understood it and had a share in its benefits. This is the man who is blest while he hears.

But it is added that *he continues therein*. If you hear the Gospel and it does not bless you, hear it again. If you have read the Word of God and it has not saved you, read it again. It is able to save your soul. Have you been searching through one gracious, earnest book and did it not seem to fit your case? Try another. Oh, if men would search for salvation as they search after hidden treasure they would not be long before they found it.

I remember, when I was seeking Christ, how I read through Doddridge's, "Rise and Progress of Religion" with an avidity such as I showed when as a boy I read some merry tale, for I devoured each page greedily. When I had done with Doddridge, I read Baxter's, "Call to the Unconverted," which did me good, but yielded me no comfort. I read each page and drank in every word, though the book was exceedingly bitter to me. I wanted Christ and if I could find Him, and eternal life through Him, it did not matter to me how often my eyes grew weary with want of sleep while reading.

Oh, if you come to that—that you must have Jesus—you *shall have Him*. If your soul is brought to feel that you will search heaven and earth through, if needful, but you will find the Savior, that Savior will soon appear to you. The hearer who gains salvation, "looks into the perfect law of liberty," *and continues therein*.

Lastly, it is added that this man is not a forgetful hearer, but *a doer of the Word* and he shall be blessed in his deed.

Is he bidden to pray? He prays as best he can. Is he bidden to repent? He asks God to enable him to repent. Is he bidden to believe? He says, "Lord, I believe: help you my unbelief." He turns everything that he hears into practice. I wish that we had thousands of hearers of that sort. I remember reading of a certain person who heard of giving a tenth of our substance to God. "Well," said he, "that is right and I will do it." And he kept his promise.

He heard that Daniel drew near to God three times a day in prayer. He said, "That is right. I will do it." And he practiced a threefold approach to the throne of grace each day. He made it a rule every time he heard of something that was excellent to practice it at once. Thus he formed holy habits and a noble character, and became a blest hearer of the Word.

Now, dear friends, our text does not say that such a man is blessed *for* the deed, but it says that such a man is blessed *in* the deed. He who does what God bids him shall not be blest *for* it, but he shall be blest *in* it. The happy result will come to us in the act of obedience. May God grant you grace henceforth whenever the Gospel is preached, to stir yourself up with the energy which God's Spirit infuses into you and say, "I will do it. I will not dream about it, or talk about it, or question about it, or say I will do it and put it off, but now at once the act commanded shall be done."

I finish with this practical suggestion. The remaining portion of life is short with some of you who hear me this day. Grey hairs are upon you here and there, and according to the course of nature, you must soon stand before your Judge. Would it not be well that you thought about another world and considered how you shall face your Lord at the last great day? The Gospel says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," which in other words means, "Trust Him." Repent. Confess your sin, forsake it and look to Christ for cleansing. That is the way of salvation—"He that believes and is baptized shall be saved."

You know all about the way of life. I am telling you a tale which you have heard a thousand times, but the question is, *when is it going to be done?* "Soon, sir," you say. But were you not here when this Tabernacle was opened? "Yes," you say, "I think I was." You said "soon" then, and you say "soon" now. You will say "soon," I expect, until that word "soon" will be met with the heavy sentence—"Too late. Too late. You cannot enter now." Take heed that this is not your case before this day has closed.

Some men die very suddenly. A sister came to me this morning and said, "My father is dead. He was well in the morning, he came home from the shop, seemed a little ill, and died on a sudden." Seeing that life is so precarious, would it not be best that you should immediately seek the Lord while He may be found and call upon Him while He is near? I would suggest that you do not begin gossiping and talking on the way home today, but that you get alone for a little while quietly.

Do you reply that you have no place where you can be alone—this is not true—you can find some place or other. I remember a sailor who used to find his prayer closet at the masthead—nobody came up there to disturb him. I knew a carpenter who used to get down in a sawpit to pray. There are many such places. The streets of London when crowded are about as lonely as anywhere and Cheapside may be as good as the mountain side if your heart desires real solitude.

Some of you, I fear, never think at all. As far as thinking goes, if your brains were taken out, many of you would get on almost as well without them. The brains of some people are only useful as a sort of salt to keep them from rotting by death. Little thinking is done by the great mass of the people except the thought, "What shall we eat and what shall we drink?"

Do, I pray you, think a little. Pause and consider what God the Lord sets before you. Be a doer of the work. Do what God bids you. As He bids you repent, repent. As He bids you believe, believe. As He bids you pray, pray. As He bids you accept His grace, God helping you, do it. Oh, that it might be done at once and to the Lord shall be praise world without end. Amen.

**PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—JAMES 1.
HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—483, 538, 992.**

If those who profit by these sermons will promote their circulation, they may be doing as much good as if they preached themselves. The preacher, in returning to his pulpit, would feel greatly cheered if he found that the circulation of the sermons largely increased. A judicious word may gain a subscriber to whom the reading may be useful. Would not some of our readers find the distribution of the discourses an easy and efficient mode of Christian service?

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